Contents

4
Essay by Walter Chaw

22
The Divine Tragedy of Marcell Jankovics
By Mitch Horowitz

54
Notes on the transfer

56
Acknowledgements

The Tragedy of Man

By

Walter Chaw

Marcell Jankovics' *The Tragedy of Man* (*Az ember tragédiája*) is a labor of love, an impossibility, a miracle. Like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it seeks to tell the ways of God to men and, in the process, again like the Milton, it (inadvertently?) makes Lucifer the only agent for activity in the world and, by so doing, the hero. The British Romanticists called Milton, whom they revered, as a "poet of the devil's part without knowing it" and I wonder if any actual product of the human hand can help but be tainted by the seduction of Original Sin. Certainly, at least, Jankovics' film can't resist Satan's sultry charms, his barbed allure, his human reason at odds with an absent God's imperial silence. Based on an 1861 play, *The Tragedy of Man* is presented in fifteen different parts, each animated in a different style, that traces Man from Eden to the Apocalypse and back - a "Divine Comedy" that took Hungarian Jankovics twenty-four years to complete, a victim of an initially state-sponsored project that devolved into a complex and unpredictable series of post-fall-of-the-Berlin-Wall producers that kept the massive project perpetually in delay and in Quixotic abeyance. I'm reminded a bit of Orson Welles' *The Other Side of the Wind* and Andrzej Żuławski's *On a Silver Globe*: other examples of passion projects too uniquely compulsive to just fade away. Each of them even leaked images, occasionally entire scenes, to tantalize the devout with the prospect of completion one fine day. Most, I'm reminded of William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and, perhaps not as incongruously as it might first appear, Alejandro Jodorowski's *The Holy Mountain*.

I have long held this thought that we can only visualize periods in history through the methods employed in documenting them - how Eric Rohmer, when he made a film, *Lady and the Duke* (2001) set during the French Revolution, used period paintings as the literal backgrounds for the drama. I remember the Civil War as sepia-tinted because of the tintype photography during that period; the 1920s as an endless Mack Sennett reel. I remember everything after the Zapruder Tape as compressed into hours rather than decades or centuries and all that came before shrouded in immeasurable time and studied imagination. It could be a personal limitation, but when people consistently exclaim how catastrophes "looked like a movie," I suspect it's a common malady. *The Tragedy of Man* expands this thought to its logical conclusion, tracing the moral development (or lack thereof) of mankind through a series of epoch-specific fables recreated in the dominant artistic forms of their respective times. When there's no art to speak of from the culture being represented (whether the far future or the first days of Eden), Jankovics conjures visions and hallucinations - he sees his task as one of approximating the incomprehensible: the "look" of the impossible past and the improbable future. What does the infinity of the void, the Christian God squatting there like a bloated spider in a cosmic web *feel* like? Swirling psychedelia, naturally. And then millennia forward to the end of Man? A post-postmodern Helmut Herbst/George Dunning representational approach assembling bits and artifacts of all the ages of art like a grand collage - like T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and its ambition to be the summary of all of Western literature. As though at the end of things invention will have died and all that is left of us will be what washes ashore from the Stygian deep of our brief and terrible span.

The first section of *The Tragedy of Man* is the Christian Genesis myth beginning with a conversation in the infinite nothing between God and Satan on through to the expulsion from Eden with a rotoscoped Adam, Eve and vulpine Satan. God is amorphous and vast - two pinpoints of light where the eyes might be. Adam and Eve are portrayed without detail: they're screens upon which images of representatives from the future ages of man are projected. Satan is opaque black - like charcoal, ochre, sumi ink in its malleable, mercurial, potential state - now in the shape of a jackal,

now something else. He makes his case for disobedience and it's a good one: Why would God want to keep something as essential as Knowledge of Good and Evil to Himself? Why would He desire to keep all of creation in ignorance? Because we are fallen things, it makes sense for us to side with another created thing. Eve transgresses, then Adam, and the first fascination of Jankovics' film is it doesn't blame them - Satan, neither, not really - rather he sees it as inevitable: how when you create a thing and give it sentience, it will be curious and it will transgress. I wonder if Jankovics saw this film, this creation of his, the same way. Maybe in the course of its long journey to life it reached a singularity along the way, fed by the toil, incubated by the heartbreak and the ambition of Jankovics and his team of animators. William Blake believed in an "infernal method" that bestowed work with the poet's soul through the poet's physical touch. He made it a point to handle each of the first prints of his "Songs of Innocence and Experience," pulled from plates he had himself etched with acid. Maybe *The Tragedy of Man,* touched an umpteen number of times, as a work that grew at the pace of the poet's evolving theology: the simplicity of his faith at the beginning of the film to the horrible fatalistic complexity of the conclusions he reaches by the end of it. *The Tragedy of Man* is very much like the inexorable progress of wisdom. It is not unlike watching the philosophical growth of a thoughtful person over the course of the length of a twenty-three year gestation.

In considering the enormity of its splendid pretention, it's also not unlike the labors of the hero of Jankovics' own *Sisyphus* (1974), a simple ink animation/form study that has a heavily-muscled *idea* of a man wrestling a boulder up a hill of identical boulders and then, as reward for his labors, starting again. Jankovics has adjusted the myth so that Sisyphus is not just doomed to push the rock, but is himself *the creator* of a mountain that will continue to grow for so long as there are rocks to push. A piece about dogged, insensible perseverance and a metaphor for the meaning of life being struggle and not the end of struggle - it becomes in this way an eloquent encapsulation of *The Tragedy of Man*. The second segment begins with cave paintings that come to life - the debate between Adam and Satan continuing in a new setting: Adam looking for meaning and Satan as a domesticated wolf promising the general futility of searching for it. He preaches the gospel of humanism: wondering rhetorically what God

has done for them besides create them? All other glories are the product of their, which is to say *our*, hard work and strife. The paintings coalesce into a more traditional animation style - that the movements are sometimes jerky and blurred, Jankovics says, is due in part to budget limitations. For me, the mechanical stuttering of the avatars against lush impressionistic landscapes lends the human figures the aspect of marionettes. They are created things (twice created, really, given "life" from the hands of created beings) forced to enact a predestined existence to their unavoidable fate. They speak of "free will" but their movements are obviously not entirely solely of their volition. Is Jankovics drawing a correlation between them and us? Not spiders held over the abyss by their silk, but puppets dangled by our creator. In this section, Adam is seen carving the "Venus of Willendorf," a fertility juju sculpted around 30,000 years ago unearthed in Austria in 1908 by a team of archaeologists (including Jankovics' Hungarian countryman Josef Szombathy). The Venus first appears in a vision in the wilderness to Adam. It lays back, a lascivious invitation. It is massive. It unfolds like a Gerald Scarfe nightmare of eroticism and atrocity and its body becomes a mountain range, her obscene fecundity reflected through the sudden waterfalls and undergrowth that cover her corpse. We are limited, it seems, in how we interpret the world.

Sex is the unifying visual and thematic trope of *The Tragedy of Man*, or rather the act of reproduction that speaks both to Man's newly-won mortality and unquenchable urge for immortality. As the scene shifts to ancient Egypt, the animation follows with two-dimensional hieroglyphs recasting Adam as a golden-skinned Pharoah, already fitted for his sarcophagus, and Eve an enslaved woman whose enslaved husband has been beaten to death by brutal slave drivers while forced to build a pyramid. "The voice of pain is low. The throne is high," she says, asking the Pharaoh to consider the cost of his desire to erect a monument that will stand against time. Satan, now as Anubis, recognizes this is a teachable moment for his pupil, saying that "thou may'st know thou art a caterpillar, though in thy own conceit thou art a butterfly." It's not Satan who wants to humble Adam, understand, rather he wants Adam to revolt against a God who would lay him low from his throne on high. Small wonder Jankovics occasionally ran afoul of Hungarian leadership sensing veiled criticism of the government in the filmmaker's fables. As the scene shifts to ancient Greece, the animation style mimics the painted amphora style found on prehistoric Greek pottery. More durable than other mediums, it's this style that we most associate with this period in western history, as is the rhetorical discourse represented in this vignette. A civil debate devolves into a traitorous mob that undermines a society founded on the fragile agreement between men to act for a while in something other than their own total self-interest. Even democracy, *The Tragedy of Man* says, is doomed both as an invention of man because it can only be administered by man. Rule by the one doesn't work, it says, but neither does rule by all.

Jankovics takes us through Ancient Rome and the birth of representational democracy, the High Middle Ages post-The Great Schism, the 1600s through woodcuts, the French Revolution in thick black lines punctuated by the red, white and blue of the French flag, the lush oils of Victorian London (and the oppressiveness of the British class structure); and then into a 20th century defined by pop artists like Peter Max and Greg Irons and icons like Superman, James Bond, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, Che Guevara, the Beatles as envisioned by Robert Balser and Jack Stokes (animators with whom Jankovics has been compared), and epoch-rattling events like the moon landing and the Vietnam War. When the film enters into a near-future dystopia in which the nations of the world have been

united under one monolithic, fascist government, *The Tragedy of Man* takes on the drawing style of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Spartan, stark black & white with thick lines and not a hint of hope in the middle of generations of increasingly fascist despair. *The Tragedy of Man* launches into deep space, too, as Adam now is an artificial intelligence piloting a spacecraft that has been constructed by robots. He becomes a created being thrice-removed from his creator and the implication is each step we take, we remove ourselves, through our arrogance and aspiration, further from God. The more we seek knowledge, in other words, the greater our fall away from Eden. I used to think "ignorance is bliss" was a curse but the older I get the more it seems like an invitation. "The deep cold terrifies me, Lucifer," says Adam, and Lucifer, as a maintenance robot engaged in starship Adam's vivisection and reconstitution tells him that after beauty dies, greatness and strength follows until all that is left is mathematics. Can our goal really be to separate reason from our viscera?

In the 17th century, Sister Jeannes des Agnes, an Ursuline nun in England, claimed she and her convent had been possessed by Satan and compelled to express their lust for Father Urbain Grandier, the parish priest at Saint-Pierre du Marché, whom they claimed visited them in spectral form and ravished them as they slept. *The Tragedy of Man* visits this story - or a story like it - after a quick sojourn through the Crusades in which Adam, now a witness to the genocidal abominations done in the name of his God, declares a wish to return "the shadows of ancestral forests (where) human worth and pure simplicity defy the poison of this polished age." This desire to regard Nature as the first testament of God is Romanticist in origin, of course, and a persuasive repudiation of the cruelties and inconsistencies of the Bible and its myriad mis/translations and mis/interpretations. To follow the thread, Jankovics' picture is testing each ecclesiastical approach historical Man has applied to his existence and found them to be not just wanting, but actually counterproductive to the continued existence of Man. Satan wishes to proselytize about the preciousness of knowledge over faith but is beaten repeatedly in practice. In the film's convent sequence, Adam the disillusioned Crusader returns from the Holy Land and engages in a pursuit of novitiate Eve who has cloistered herself behind brick and iron. Adam attempts to break through by tearing a vaginal-shaped hole in the wall. Meanwhile, a randy nun and Satan mirror Adam's courtly advances with rude imitations and explicit coupling. One way is repression - the other is freedom: chivalry is contrivance and our natural state is venal.

The meaning of life, then, is neither the pursuit of knowledge nor the adherence to blind faith. Not technology, not religion. Piousness is determined to be hypocrisy; science just another kind of religion. Caste systems are arbitrary and fated to rise and then fall beneath popular revolution; politics just the other side of the same devalued coin as any other faith. The rebels become the leaders who then fall beneath the blade of new rebels who reject the ossification that are the footmen to power and wealth. There is no happiness in any of these man-made systems, these organizing principles for temporary civilizations. The tragedy of *The Tragedy of Man* is our ambition as a species is always tempered by the denial of our base nature. No matter how corseted and powdered, we are only moderately-intelligent primates driven by sex. I love, during

the French Revolution sequence, how the proletariat rips off the bodice of a female aristocrat, baring her breasts before beheading her, and then declare proudly how they have "done justice." Sexual violence and humiliation are never far from the process of a "principled" mob. In the heat of revolution, our true selves are revealed. The film's most powerful sequences are arguably its Orwellian surveillance future-state and its finale in an arctic purgatory. One describes the temporariness of all things (trees, animals, even the earth become curiosities in a museum with curators doing their best to explain the purpose of a comb, a record, and a picture of, is that Jane Birkin?) And another delivers the final thesis of Jankovics' masterwork: that there is no meaning to life but for the people you love and who love you in return. There is no measure of fame or utility that lasts forever. Cut open a corpse on an assembly line of corpses and we are all made of the same, sometimes-reusable, parts. Indeed, most things pass into forgetfulness within one generation of its passing. What persists? Only love does.

Consider a scene during its Victorian London sequence in which Adam and Satan descend upon a circus in full swing, a Ferris wheel and carousel spinning like the loom of Fates measuring out and cutting mortal thread. Adam wonders if there will be poetry even here among the technological wonders of Man in this era and Satan reassures that so long as there are laws restricting the carnal expression of desire, there will be "poetry and great ideas" alive in our world. The implication is that the root of art is "satanic" - that is, an active act of creation in defiance of, or an attempted reunion with, an absent God. From a certain point of view, by the end of *The Tragedy of Man*, the danger becomes that it makes its arguments so well - so *artfully* - that all that's left is a sense of despair that there might, in fact, be no good reason to keep pushing that rock up the hill except that it gives you a purpose until you can die. Such is the irony of critical approaches like deconstruction - that nothing means anything and everything is built on a sliding, decayed and ever-decaying foundation - is at the end of it, to be really faithful to deconstructing something, you end up deconstructing the critical approach itself. In Douglas Adams' The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy there is a sequence in which God disproves Himself with logic and vanishes in a puff of ideological smoke. Tellingly, the passage concerns the existence of a creature, the Babel

Fish, that is too useful to be an accident and therefore, because God is a product of faith and not evidence, God must not then exist. It's intellectual masturbation this tension between thought and faith, played as a zero sum game and yet isn't hedonism also its own limitation? Is enlightenment the death of pleasure in the same way indulgence is the death of the flesh?

For as grand and far reaching as *The Tragedy of Man* can be - with as metatextual as it is in its reproduction of various representational styles and parsing of notable philosophical shifts in the intellectual evolution of Man - what it does best is show how we as a species have always been, and maybe only been, interested in a return to Eden. We are obsessed with the same stories and so we reconstitute them across all time as different media emerges, techniques evolve, styles phase in and out of vogue. Puppet shows, shadow theater, traveling minstrels and vaudeville, newspaper, radio, the printing press and novels. Humans survived because of our ability to perpetuate our culture through stories and this film proposes to draw a single definable, articulable throughline through all human cultures (with the notable exception of the Far East) and eras. Does he manage it? I will say this, that when my daughter was born after years of miscarriage and heartbreak, when I heard her cry for the first time in the delivery room, my wife asked me if that was her and we wept out of joy, relief, an indefinable stew of emotions including grief for the children we lost, for my father who died just a month before his first grandchild was born… in a moment, all the cliches about the miracle of birth were tested and found to be true. At the end of *The Tragedy of Man*, after all the striving, the fighting, the feeling of hopelessness in the face of an unknowable and silent God - there is between Adam and Eve the discovery of a pregnancy and… maybe that's all there is. Whether our children are flesh or story, inscribed in them is the substance of all of us. That's beautiful, right? It's beautiful.

Walter Chaw is Senior Film Critic for FilmFreakCentral.net. He has bylines in the *NY Times, Washington Post, Criterion, The LA Weekly, NY Post's Decider, NY Magazine's Vulture*, and is an occasional guest on NPR's "Pop Culture Happy Hour." He has written a monograph on *Miracle Mile* and a critical study of the career of Walter Hill called "A WALTER HILL FILM."

The Divine Tragedy of Marcell Jankovics

By

Mitch Horowitz

Twentieth-century artist Brion Gysin famously observed, "Writing is fifty years behind painting." To that I would add, animation is fifty years behind Marcell Jankovics.

The Hungarian graphic artist and director's *The Tragedy of Man*, based on countryman Imre Madách's 1861 like-named play, does for the screen what Milton's *Paradise Lost* did for literature. The hand-drawn epic, labored over from 1988 to 2011, retells the Western creation myth, across tens of millennia, from the perspective of the Great Rebel or what the ancient Hebrews termed וטשה or *ha-sa-taan*, literally "The Satan" or the adversary (sometimes the prosecutor), an antecedent to the Latin-derived Lucifer, or light bringer, originally a condemnation of the ancient king of Babylon as a falling star.

Conceptually, this Promethean force is what our culture reduces to Happy Meals in the form of Darth Vader, Loki, and Maleficent. But under any term, and in Jankovics' iteration, this is the impulse of self-determination and defiance that drove humanity from its anointed paradise and remade the individual into a protean being of friction and joy, creation and destruction, death and tragedy. In a passage worthy of Milton, as the Creator is admiring his cosmic clockwork, Lucifer, rather than pay homage, challenges the very provenance of creation:

'Midst thy conceits didst thou not feel the void
Which put a barrier to all existence
And thereby forced you to create?
That barrier was named Lucifer,
The primeval spirit of negation.
Thou madest matter,
I thereby gained space.
Where life is, death stands nigh;
Depression follows after happiness;
Shadows are cast by light, in hope there's doubt;
Where'er thou art, thou wilt see me there,
And I who know thee, should I do thee homage?
Jointly we have created.
I claim my share.

The sterling translation by O.P. Sanger must be noted. In Lucifer and God's contention, no sentimentalities or false heroics appear. Yin-yang rules creation. Without contrast there would *exist* no creation. Contrast and self-expression, as Satan argues, are painful: friction is the cost of creativity.

Jankovics' eye for history is astounding. He depicts primeval man carving a bulbous statuette termed a *Venus figurine* by mid-nineteenth-century archeologists. Museums and universities possess hundreds of them. These carved forms, strictly speaking, predate humanity. They were quite possibly the handiwork of our pre-Sapiens ancestors, Neanderthals (although many archaeologists now connect them to the early modern human Gravettian and Solutrean cultures). These Neanderthal forebearers to humanity, known to us only since the mid-nineteenth century, dwelled from about 400,000 years ago (the best known about 150,000 years) to their probable point of extinction about 40,000 years ago.

Historically, so-called Venus figurines, to which the director returns several times, are considered fertility talismans or appeals to "mother goddesses," although their uses were possibly myriad. In physical appearance, the statuettes significantly differ from our understanding of Neanderthal beings. They are feminine, round, and bulbous with pendulous breasts, some of them almost resembling the grinning "chubby Buddha" statues called Budai, a depiction associated with good luck and prosperity beginning in eleventh-century China. Often about four inches, these Venus figurines could be carried around — an important feature for members of a nomadic, hunter-gather society.

The centrality of these representations to early and later acts of *The Tragedy of Man* seem a reminder that humanity *deified itself* and worshipped a projection of its fertile and creative energies. The feminine principle of birth—itself a protean force—drives and sustains the archetypal man of the film's title. This force rescues him—possibly—from the twin despair of hopelessness and death.

Jankovics' story of collective man is marked by limited progress and overwhelming destruction. The maestro's images of the human mob first as a wave and then as a whirlpool during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror are among the most expressive works of animation I have ever seen. This terrifying visual points to a deeper aspect of Jankovics' storytelling. With almost life-giving refreshment, the director depicts man's brutality with total absence of cheap or stereotypical political vibes. No one is fêted because he is a "revolutionary" or belongs to a category rendered confectionary in the academic imagination. Nor is anyone spared Jankovics' searing microscope due to cultural or social identities.

Hence, there appears no easy or distillable message in the pilgrimage of the film's archetypal Adam guided by Lucifer through the horrors and rare splendors of history—including humanity's grim future under the boot of a totalitarian global government. In a future world of stripped-bare nature, human guts and bone are used as resources (if not food). When Adam can no longer bear to look, his Satanic guide lifts him to the sensationless cosmos. Floating in the vacuum of space, Adam asks Lucifer: "Loveless and strifeless, to what can life attain?"

There is no clear answer. The film's one nod to redemption—and the factor that deters archetypal man from suicide—is the pregnancy of Eve. Creation is self-sustaining. In that vein, if one can extrapolate from the theme of biological birth, expression is redemption. Creation or God fashioned man just as man fashions his bulbous, pregnant Venus figurine. Creation is the purpose of life. "As above, so below," goes the Hermetic dictum from the late-ancient manuscript called the *Emerald Tablet*. It is the closest we have to a universal law. As we were created so must we create, at least within the physical parameters we know.

In that sense, it seems to me that a good deal of what we term neurosis in contemporary life arises from lack of expression, including dwelling in circumstances and amid people who crush one's expression. These are grave and serious problems, although routinely overlooked as root causes of unhappiness, cruelty, and addiction.

Watching the visual splendor and intelligence of Jankovics' graphics leaves me feeling both awe and melancholy. The latter because I am reminded of the assault that graphic and performance arts face today from computer-generated imagery (CGI). I am unsentimental about the onrush of technology. It marches inevitably forward, bringing a spectrum of results. But I am struck—and I assume I am unalone in this—at how boring CGI has become. From the perspective of an audience member, I see no craft in it. No sense of wonder at how a puppeteer like Jim Henson created his magically lifelike beings. At how an effects team caused a nuclear sub to hydraulically crash through the ceiling of the Arctic shelf in *Ice Station Zebra*. And at how the hands of Jankovics and his collaborators meticulously produced cel after cel of wildly emotive, expressive moving images.

I may belong to the last generation of writers who produce their work without any AI influence. And also the last audiobook narrators who consider their task a human one. I am sometimes glad to be at the latter stage of my career rather than the start. Such a vantage point may afford a little freedom. I recently rejected an offer from Amazon to narrate an epic book that I really wanted to read on behalf of a brilliant friend who wrote it. The giant offered peanuts; they wouldn't budge. Give it to the robots, I said. We cannot degrade our craft.

Speaking of robots, Jankovics depicts man's fate as exactly that. In space, Lucifer replaces Adam's body parts—from organs to limbs—with mechanics. It is, for me, among the most visually striking aspects of the film. We face a different question regarding technology today than the world did at the film's 1988 commencement. As I write these words, I can think of few people, from any walk of life, who are not asking what AI, CGI, and robotics will make of their jobs. About this, we can only speculate.

How we relate to the new tech is further complicated by our culture's lack of definition of terms like "intelligence"—is it nonlocal or a byproduct of brain matter? The latter seems unsustainable in an age of neuroplasticity in which brain scans show that thoughts, whatever a thought may be, alter neural pathways through which electrical impulses travel in the brain. Whatever else may be said of quantum realities and the perceptual basis of life, it is evident, even within noncontroversial science, that mind affects matter. As philosophies, materialism and strict physicalism are kaput.

Adam's journey across time could be seen as both possible and actual in the nascence of quantum computing and its revelations about the multiverse. Consider this late 2024 statement from Google about a trial-run of its quantum-computing processer, Willow:

> It performed a computation in under five minutes that would take one of today's fastest supercomputers 10^{25} or 10 septillion years…This mind-boggling number exceeds known timescales in physics and vastly exceeds the age of the universe. It lends credence to the notion that quantum computation occurs in *many parallel universes, in line with the idea that we live in a multiverse*. [emphasis added]

Evidence unsought is evidence most compelling. Bankers, financiers, and computer engineers agree that the "impossible" data emergent from inconceivably fast quantum-computing prototypes means that the information found *must be plucked from other dimensions of reality* coexistent with our own. We are at the pre-dawn of understanding our multi-dimensional reality, as well as that of other beings and technology

that occasionally, though with increasing frequency, "blink" into our realm of awareness. I see *The Tragedy of Man*, conceived and begun as a film in an era preceding the consumer Internet, as foresightful of these developments.

Concurrent with the multiverse thesis stands a counterpart, perhaps less extolling of human agency or possibility. In 2016, five years after Jankovics' wrap, Bank of America, in what must have come as a mild surprise to investors, noted "there is a 20-50 percent probability that humans are already living in a computer-simulated virtual world." The estimate is conservative. Side by side with the interdimensionality model exists an equally compelling—*and not necessarily exclusive*—concept: we live in a simulation.

This existential shock populates our media, from *The Matrix* to *Barbie*—all of which is a cultural exercise in digesting a profoundly difficult prospect: we consist not of DNA but bytes. "One thing that later generations might do with their super-powerful computers," philosopher Nick Bostrom writes, "is run detailed simulations of their forebears or of people like their forebears." If we rule out the simulation thesis, we must also rule out the possibility of a future human civilization that could support such technology. Most people find that untenable. And if we are part of an ancestor-simulation it follows that the weirdness of our world, and that depicted by Jankovics, is either: a) programmed into the simulation; b) reflects a glitch in the simulation (e.g., déjà vu); or c) mirrors the reality of interdimensionality as validated by our post-human ancestors, in the same way that Jankovics opens his query considering our position vis a vis our Neanderthal ancestors.

Seen in a traditional sense, the film's Adam is a classic pilgrim, navigating the allegorical truth of man's fate. As alluded, the one glimmer of possibility appears when the hero rejects suicide—the ultimate defiance of Creation—on learning of Eve's pregnancy. Is there, perhaps, some larger hope here for humanity? Is Adam's experience humanity's universal one? In the wake of 9/11 in 2001, the dean of Princeton's engineering department, Robert Jahn, discovered a "global consciousness" effect in the hours immediately preceding and following the trauma. It appears through

"random-number generators" or "eggs" strategically placed worldwide. These machines, which emit chaotic random numbers, displayed patterns where none should exist. We as a human community, at times of shared emotion, seem to participate in a larger thought field, or what the Ancient Greeks called *Nous*.

Ten years later, this meta-lution entered a new phase. In 2011, the year of Jankovics' release, Cornell psychologist Daryl J. Bem published a scholarly paper detailing a decade of clinical evidence for retrocausality—in which future actions, such as studying for an exam, impact cognitive performance in the present. (Retrocausal studies appear in quantum physics but Bem's trials were the first to take a cognitive approach.) In the ensuing decade, the results have proven confirmatory in large-scale meta-analysis. In short, Bem's juried, replicated, and pooled evidence shows that *actions you take in the future affect the present.* As Einstein and Schrödinger taught, and I think Jankovics would agree, *time is nonlinear and all events occur infinitely at once.*

Might this mean that Adam's realization of *a single life's worth*—of humanity, in essence, exercising its creative capacity—resonates (perhaps retro-causally) through the typically brutal chapters of human history, perhaps leavening them? That question, too, reflects the yin-yang possibility of man.

I doubt, however, that Jankovics will let us off that easily. The endless millennia of destruction, war, and cruelty lining Adam's journey is the likelier circuitry and cycle of existence. In that vein, I suspect the Hungarian auteur would agree with East European seekers from an earlier generation. In his classic of esoteric exploration, *In Search of the Miraculous*, Russian mathematician and spiritual seeker P.D. Ouspensky recalled witnessing piles of freshly made crutches driven down a Moscow street toward the Russian front during World War I:

> I had seen two enormous lorries…loaded to the height of the first floor of the houses with new unpainted wooden crutches. For some reason I was particularly struck by these lorries. In these mountains of crutches for legs which were not yet torn off there was a particularly cynical mockery of all the things with which people deceive themselves.

Upon hearing of the scene, philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff, Ouspensky's mentor, replied, "What do you expect? People are machines." Gurdjieff meant this in the most literal sense. Not that the individual isn't made of flesh and bone —but that he possesses no more capacity for choice and *doing* than an automaton. This does not contradict Jankovics' view.

Adam is the "everyman," the stand-in for humanity. In the end, is his or our life-affirming realization sufficient? It reminds me of an episode in Erich Maria Remarque's anti-war classic, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. At one point, Remarque's protagonist, young German soldier Paul, vainly attempts to comfort and save a mortally wounded French counterpart. When his foe dies, the young soldier continues:

> "Comrade," I say to the dead man, but I say it calmly, "to-day you, to-morrow me. But if I come out of it, comrade, I will fight against this, that has struck us both down; from you, taken life — and from me — ? Life also. I promise you, comrade. It shall never happen again.

As the sun sets, Paul is beset with exhaustion, fear, and hunger. His vow ebbs:

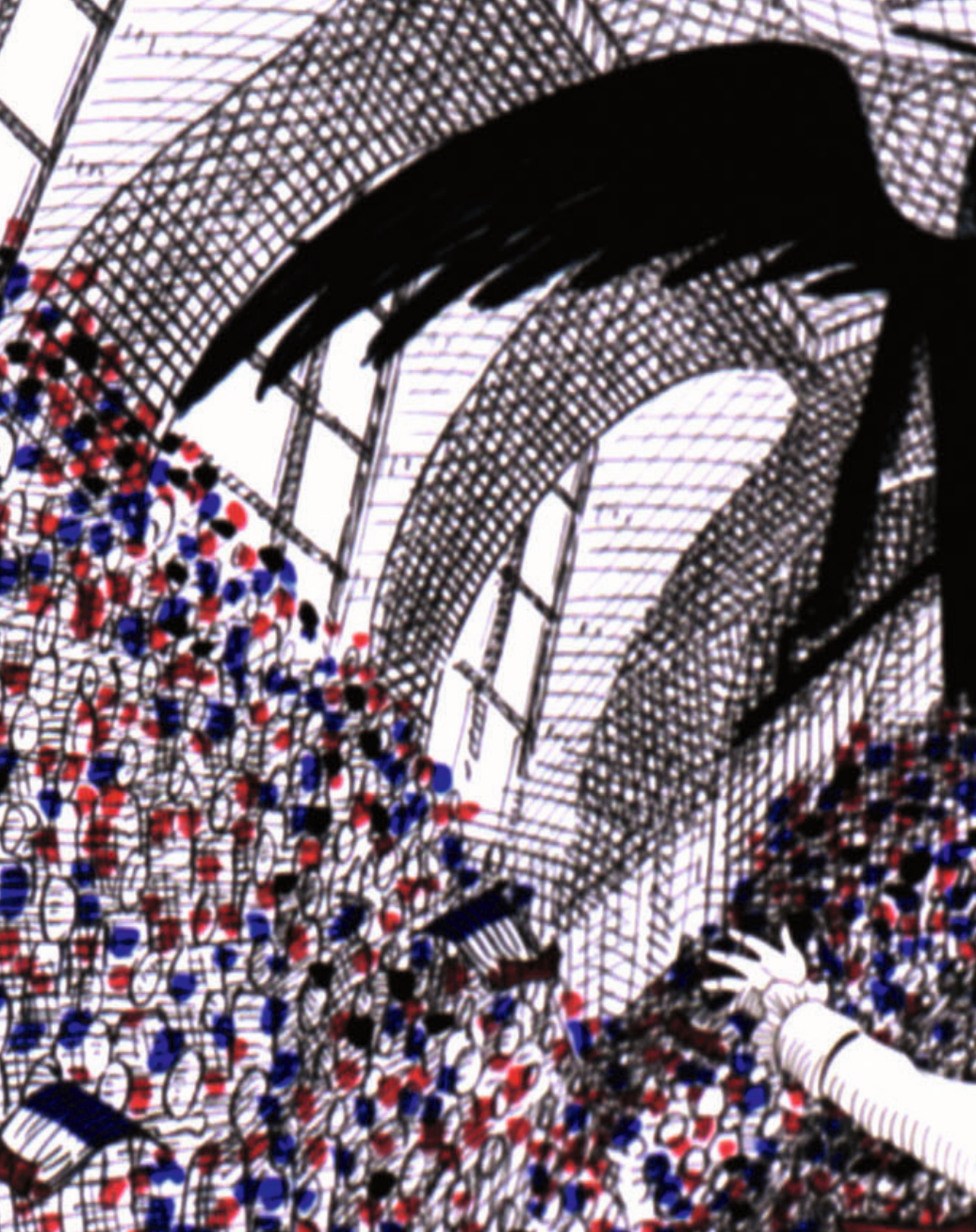
> I think no more of the dead man, he is of no consequence to me now. With one bound the lust to live flares up again and everything that has filled my thoughts goes down before it. Now, merely to avert any ill-luck, I babble mechanically: "I will fulfill everything, fulfill everything I have promised you — " but already I know I shall not do so.

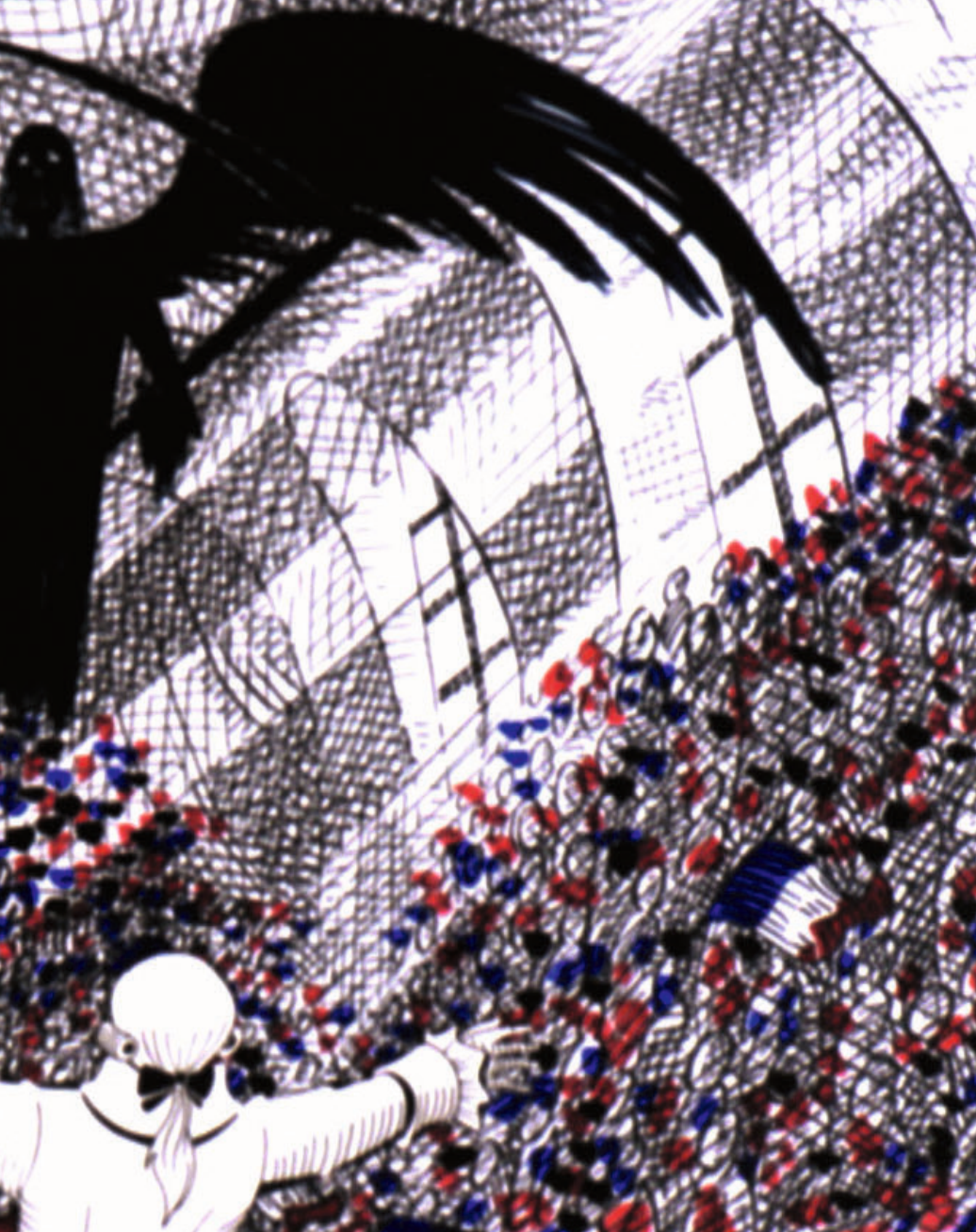
In a haunting observation toward the end of the movie, as Adam despairs over once-lofty man's future in a freezing wasteland of animalistic beings—not at the dawn of life as primeval man was but at the ugly, subsistence-starved end—Lucifer strikes down his companion's laments:

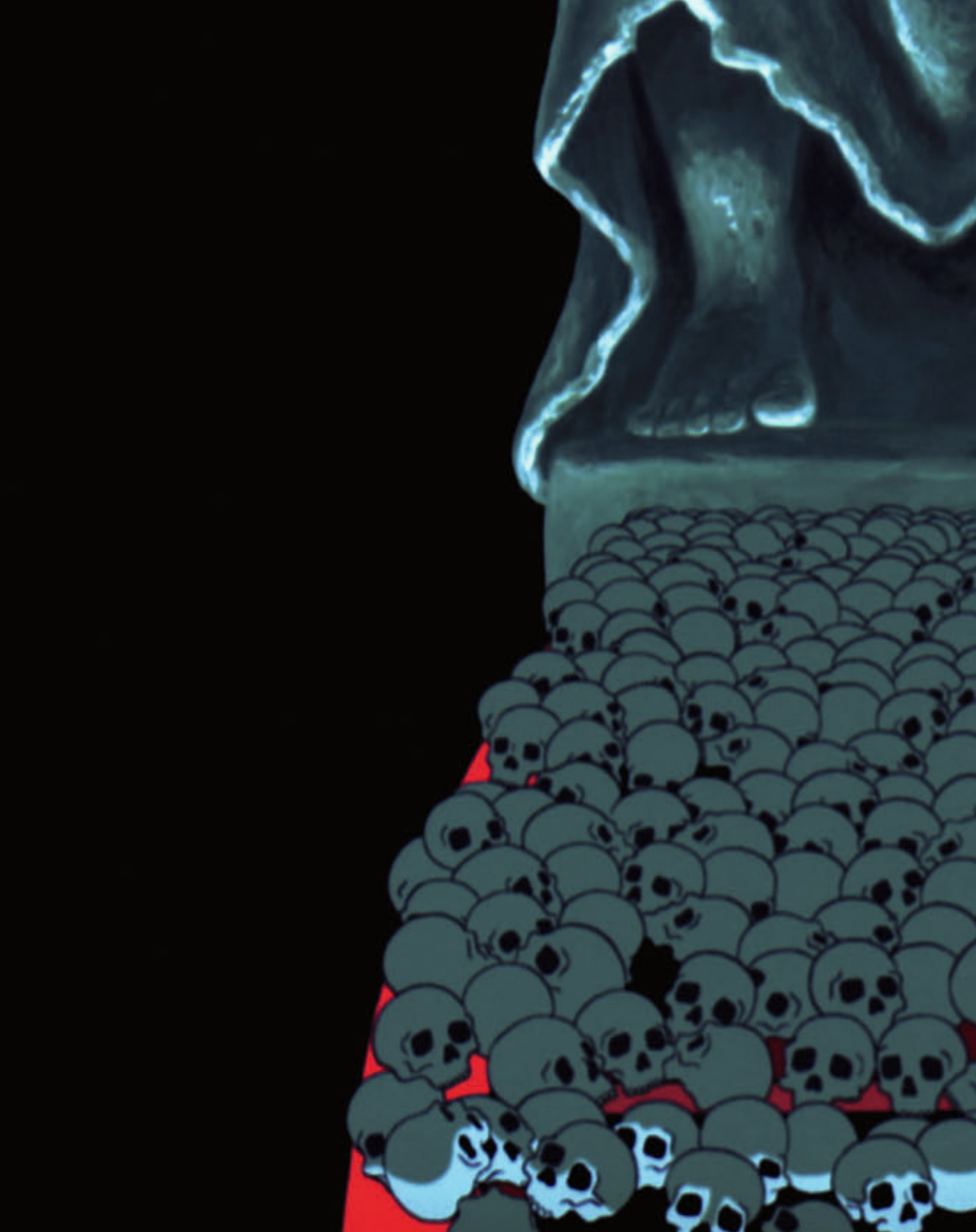
> You reason like a well-fed man, while your comrade's philosophy comes from an empty stomach. With reason you won't vanquish one another. You would agree at once, if either you were hungry, or if he were full. The animal is always first in you And only when it is appeased man becomes conscious, and in his great pride despises his real nature.

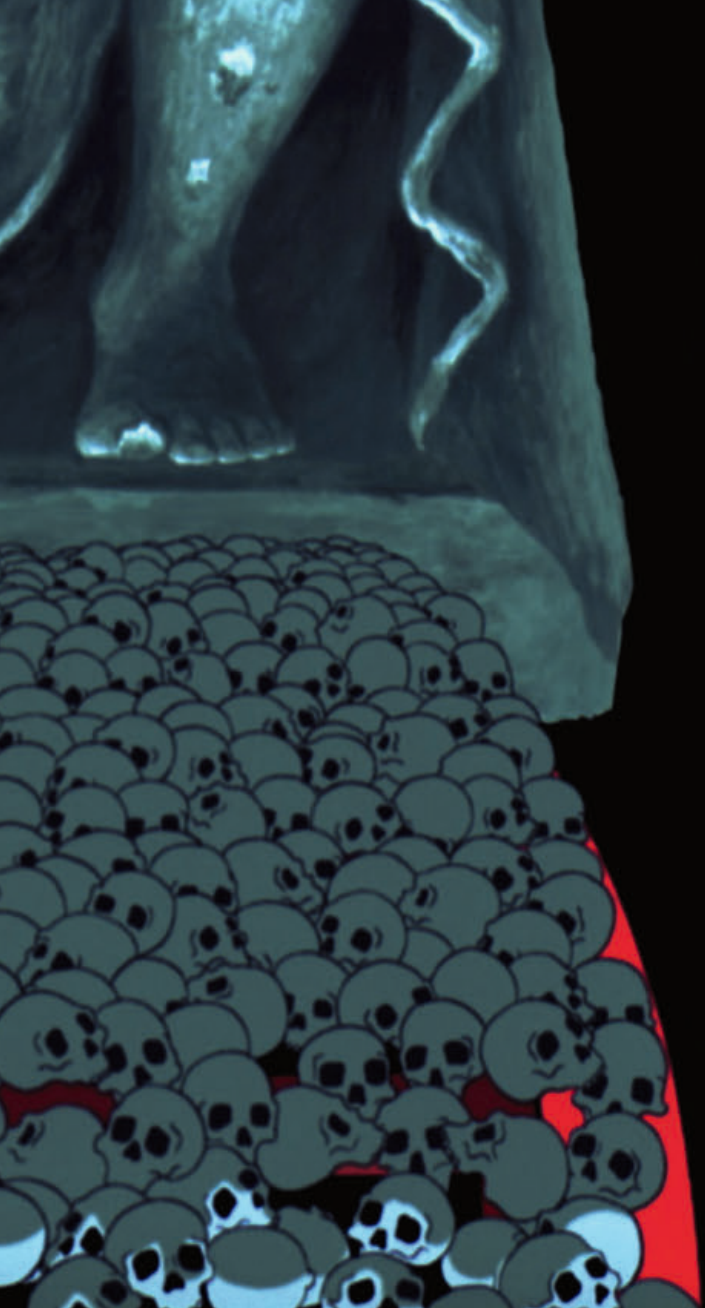
I cannot venture which side of humanity—Creative or Animal (or Machine) tips the scale. I can conclude only that vanity feeds our perception of personal exception. The most dangerous thing a viewer of *The Tragedy of Man* can do is assume that he or she is on the side of sensitivity and pathos, lamenting human nature versus seeing oneself within it.

Mitch Horowitz is a PEN Award-winning historian whose books include *Occult America, The Miracle Club, Daydream Believer, Uncertain Places, Modern Occultism,* and *Practical Magick*. He plays himself in Shudder's V/H/S/BEYOND, a 2025 Critics' Choice Award nominee for Best Movie made for Television. His work is censored in China.









Notes on the Transfer

THE TRAGEDY OF MAN was Marcell Jankovics' epic final film. Completed over 23 years, it's made up of a variety of animation techniques. From traditional cel animation shot on 35mm film to the latest digital technologies - and everything in between, often even mixing formats. Jankovics did everything he had to in order to bring his magnum opus to life - and thank goodness he did. Given the way in which the film was made you'll notice a variety of looks in this transfer. Some appear very filmic, while others may have a video quality.

Mozinet Films in Hungary shared this from the post-production supervisor on THE TRAGEDY OF MAN: "The fact is that we have been working on the film for almost 14 years and only have the final files. So the errors you see in the picture remain as they are. ...The process was to take episodes made over many years, and towards the end, we used datacine to uniform the HD video files. ...Then there was another polish and the addition of mixed sound. ...But all this is only true for the final assembly of the creation process. Before that, the film was shot scene by scene for 23 years. And as such, it is an imprint of the animation filmmaking techniques of each era. There are cel layers painted on and there are computer-drawn, painted colours."

We've done our very best to present the film as it was made. No attempts have been made to "improve" upon any elements, nor have we attempted to match looks across scenes. A minimal amount of flicker reduction has been applied to some scenes and film-based scenes have had dust, dirt and scratches removed as appropriate.

Special Thanks to:

For Mozinet Kft.:
Gábor Böszörményi
Ajándok Gyenis

For the National Film Institute (NFI), Hungary:
György Ráduly
Clara Giruzzi

Piroska Martsa
István Orosz
Anna Klaniczay
James Hancock
Adam Rackoff
Martin Kessler
Walter Chaw
Mitch Horowitz
Evan Chester
Beth Morris
David Mackenzie / Fidelity In Motion
Jesse Nelson / DiabolikDVD

Feature © Mozinet Kft., under license to Deaf Crocodile Films 2024.
Special Features © Deaf Crocodile Films 2025.